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ABSTRACT

The purpose of early learning centers and the home as the child's first center for learning are discussed. The center for early learning is a place for creative expression, of close human relationships, a place for fostering health, emotional and social development, as well as intellectual development, but the base of action is the child. Home-centered educational programs are offered as an alternative to the early learning center. The home may offer the child the support the child needs or it may offer neglect and abuse. Variety is essential in learning centers. Intellectual development of the child is closely linked to the controlled introduction of novelty into the child's physical learning centers. The adult is responsible for studying the child and for matching materials for learning with his emerging needs. Inextricable interrelationships exist between physical materials, intellectual development, language, and affect. The restriction of either damages the development of the other. All of these can be provided in the family or the school setting. (DB)

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FAMILY AND SCHOOL CENTERS OF LEARNING FOR YOUNG CHILDREN*

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The critics of early learning centers (Moore and Moore, Harpers, July 1972 and Readers Digest, October 1972) say that "sending four year-olds off to school results in more harm than good." That "children probably shouldn't attend school until they are seven or eight years old." Such criticisms direct our attention to the possible abuses of early learning centers, particularly out-of-family setting. But regardless of our convictions regarding the appropriate setting for young children's learning, let us not subscribe to the careless assumption that the child development center is inherently evil or that the family center is inherently good. History, research and experience have shown that many out-of-home centers provide the valuable emotional and intellectual support so critical to the growing child. Conversely, the evidences of neglect and abuse of the young in some homes is sordid and shocking. Consider the Battered Children's Ward of Chicago's Cook County Hospital or at a less extreme level, consider the incidence of malnutrition and disease diagnosed among the Nation's Head Start population. But let it be clear--poverty is not equivalent to child neglect, nor do riches guarantee the provision of child needs--loving, caring, skillful and available adults are required--the ownership of property is not equivalent to good child care.

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The critics agree with early childhood educators that intelligence and social development proceed at an incredibly rapid pace between birth and age five but they indict wrongly when they say we interpret brightness as

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readiness for the world of schooling. For decades, our professional literature has stressed early education is not preparation for first grade. Rather it is to enhance the total development of the child through the provision of a rich environment for creative exploration in the presence of an affectionate, skillful adult.

The critics say that very young children in school generally present a discouraging picture---Their friends who were delayed a year or so quickly catch up and pass them--and usually become more stable and highly motivated. The critics have assumed erronously that public school graded kindergarten and primary classes represent early childhood education. In reality, we regard the graded, lock-step structure as an archaic relic of a by-gone age in schooling at any level (poultry and eggs are graded--not children). When programs for young children have been carefully designed, evaluated and extended through the primary grades the early gains have persisted--contrary to popular opinion. In sum, progress in a bad primary experience cannot be the test of a good preschool experience.

The critics of early centers for development say that the "brain's various abilities to function develop in close relation to its physiological maturation," and that "the young child cannot meet the demands of formal schooling prior to the level of development usually achieved by age seven or eight." Here again, the criticism strikes against a state of affairs that does not or should not exist in programs for young children. The result could be the equivalent of discrediting the medical profession because some doctors engage in quackery or malpractice. The center for early learning is a place for creative expression, of close human relationships, a place for fostering health, emotional and social development, and, yes, intellectual development.

But the base of action is the child. The degree and nature of formality in teaching must be a personal--to the child--thing, not a pre-conceived adult curriculum; the good teacher of the young cannot select the curriculum before meeting the children.

The critics say that "children thrive better in bad homes than in good institutions." I say this is nonsense. In the poorest homes, children do not thrive at all, they shrivel and die--from malnutrition, from lack of love, from assault and battery--in America or India, the effects are the same. In our Corpus Christi Early Childhood Center some infants of seven months cannot turn over alone because of inadequate home care. In neighborhoods across America children are left during the daylight hours to fend for themselves. Middle-class mothers continue to join the vast female work force and good caretakers are less and less accessible. There are over 100 infant centers in America for children of adolescent mothers.

Finally, it appears that the critics are looking to early childhood educators for their ammunition. In response to the concern--"What then is the alternative to early schooling?" they point to the home-centered educational programs of Gray, Levenstein, Schaefer, Gordon and Home Start as the most promising practical solution. In sum, they ridicule our shortcomings and claim our successes.

We <u>are</u> indeed witnessing a revolution in early childhood development. We <u>are</u> learning how to care for young children while preserving the integrity of the family. The experimentation of the latter 60's has added substantially to our storehouse of knowledge and the construction of healthy learning environments will continue.

The family home context is the child's first center for learning. Here he enters into a life long process of bringing meaning and order to things

around him. Later he will go to school and a second major setting for learning will have its influence.

Some day the child will experience the breathtaking vision of a Dallas or a Disney World from a jetliner and a vision of his entire previous life of objects and things may pass before him in a unimaginably complex array of gadgets and colors and lights--all made by man for man--the ultimate mechanical learning center.

Or perhaps the child will one day visit a sister planet and through the genius of technological man he will witness an earthrise--the ultimate natural learning center. (Perhaps this sight will be as strikingly beautiful as the sunrise across the lake from my room this morning.)

Ultimate centers, both physical and natural, have their small beginnings in the eye and mind of the child. The cradle contains the rattles and whistles that encourage attention and response. The creeper's floor may be richly furnished with toys and grown-up objects that invite the unleashing of innate exploratory drives. The toddler's world may be filled with drawers full of exciting shapes and colors, with toys that walk, talk, eat, cry and eliminate, or in America's ghettoes, the floor may be barren and forbidding--Where is the middle ground?

The child arrives at school. He may be immersed in textbooks and workbooks, pencils and chalk, rulers and routines--the brainstorm of the scientist. Or he may find himself free to seek and do at will among a sea of puzzles, pegboards, and paraphernalia--the undefined curriculum. Where is the balance?

The condition of the child, torn between opposing forces, enters at birth in many American homes into the dilemma so aptly described by Toffler in Future Shock. The reality of overabundance for some and abject destitution for others, of jets vs. bicycles. Can there by no rhythm or logic or restraint

in man's physical learning centers? Is nature outmoded? The ingenuous activity centers created by teachers for this conference show what can be done by creative people. And they suggest a solution to America's littering problem--take it to the nearest early childhood center!

The evolution of the physical learning center indeed threatens the existence of natural learning centers. The substitution of artificial objects for natural ones is easy, for time is preserved and instant economy is achieved. But long term effects are another matter. In the world of the future it will not be possible for everyone to have the energy and natural resources required to construct and operate the material things that many Americans enjoy today. Children today must learn to share--to give up rather than to receive--in the hope that the spirit and practice of sharing and giving will guide their actions as future businessmen and statesmen. In making decisions about today's learning centers we must take into account what the world may be like in the next century where today's children will be living and we will be absent.

The transiency of throw-away things must be balanced with enduring things to preserve our natural abundance and to build the security of similarity in children. The creative imaginations of children must be applied in the adult's selection and use of materials. A good learning aid has multiple purposes--from the simple development of a primary image to the combination of forms and images to build ever increasing concepts and generalizations. Consider the lowly building block--in reality a storehouse of concepts--size, shape, color, dimensionality, weight, space, texture, action, and in combination with others, it becomes the stuff of even more complex construction applications. (The blocks in the University of Texas nursery school are 13 years old, refinished each year and still smooth and attractive.)

Variety is essential in learning centers. The sensori-motor intelligence of the infant and the preconceptual logic of the young child are developed through actions on objects, through exploring and manipulating, but every object has its limitations as a learning device. Intellectual development of the child is closely linked to the controlled introduction of novelty into the child's physical learning centers. The center is modified--gradually substitution of complex items for simpler items as development of the child prescribes. The adult is responsible for studying the child and for matching materials for learning with his emerging needs.

All the physical things, the blocks, puzzles, vehicles, climbing apparatus, picture books, dress-up clothes, art materials, lose their power in the absence of humans and their unique abilities of language. This has been demonstrated in certain Montessori experiments. In addition, human affect--love vs. hate, warmth vs. coldness, support vs. rejection, reward vs. punishment--will set the direction and force of the child's attention and energy. Thus, inextricable interrelationships exist between physical materials, intellectual development, language, and affect. The restriction of either damages the development of the other. All of these can be provided in the family or the school setting.

Finally, the child demands and deserves adults who cultivate and live lives of responsibility and respect for others. As Sylvia Ashton Warner (Spearpoint) puts it, Americans are remarkably successful at producing long legged children with thrice-great brains but where is the respect and responsibility? Where is the adult authority? Is age the only difference between adults and children?

> "Monty, you can be the chalk boy."
> "I dowanna," from the King of the Wannadowannas, a leading lord of creation.

"Why not"

"I don't have to, that's all," with an authority I could do with myself, confirmed by a roll on the carpet.

"Why don't you have to?"

"Jus because I dowanna job." Wanna, wanna, wanna, dowanna; excellent words for a song.

"But you use the chalk."

"I didn this morning. I was playing with blocks."

Any five-year-old can floor me in debate. Brains and legs is the whole story. "Well, what about being the block boy?"

Irritated authority, "I said I dowanna job. I said I don have to. I can do what I like."

"Really?"

"A-huh"

"Interesting. I suppose you've brought your servants with you." ...

...Without the audience of the American teachers, this would have been over long ago.

Parents and teachers are not equipment to be manipulated. The learning center can be fragmented--fleeting relationships, stiff and formal, undisciplined. It can be cold, barren and punishing, like a concentration camp or a second grade classroom I once saw. We in the Southern Association for Children Under Six can help to assure that all environments of learning for the young (family or school) become centers of flexible order and symmetry, balanced between the natural and the synthetic, the real and the fanciful, places of warmth, responsibility and mutual respect.